

‘Growing Sustainable Communities Through Climate Change through Storytelling (Learning) Networks and regional Knowledge Ecologies

to tell the stories and share the learning about how different Peoples are engaged in the regeneration and healing of their land and communities.

This storytelling network would be open to the stories of Indigenous and local communities working as custodians and stewards of their places and landscapes.

This initiative is based on the imperative of fostering and widening the ideas of a new revitalized earth culture in these times of rapid global change.

I’ve written this discussion paper to initiate a conversation about the possibilities of partnering such a project. It is hoped that this will lead to a rich and meaningful collaboration with, useful community, learning and research outcomes.

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1. The Opportunities of Supporting a Storytelling Learning Network:

Many Indigenous communities across the globe, whether different Aboriginal Peoples of Austral-Asia, the Peoples of Aoetora, the Pacific and the Indian Peoples of the Americas, are engaged in healing and regenerating their lands and communities. There are also numerous examples across Australia of bottom up community land management volunteer groups who are partnering conservation projects with top down support from government agencies and NGO’s¹. There are similar other initiatives across the Pacific linking up now in education for sustainability networks. Yet this rich learning about healing and regenerating communities and sustainable environmental management is fragmented and difficult to access. There is a need and opportunity to share this learning. A storytelling network is one way to interconnect, to share insights and nurture this renaissance and dreaming of a revitalized earth community culture.

There are now many rich examples of Indigenous communities initiating healing work, of dealing with the on-going trauma of dislocation and colonial dispossession from their lands. Atkinson (2002) for example outlines a distinct Australian Aboriginal healing community process of deep listening, contemplating and learning from each

¹ For example the Australian Landscape Trust’s work in sustainable land management and restoration in the Riverland area on the Murray River in South Australia and the Condamine Catchment Alliance in south-east Queensland with 67 local community projects in sustainable resource management are just 2 examples: see Davidson (2006) and Binning & Felman (2000)

other called ‘dadirri’. This open learning conversation and process way of being² helps support new ways of re-building harmonious relationships, of dealing with conflict, acknowledging the diversity and special-ness of individuals in regenerating community.

Building a storytelling network creates opportunities to listen, sit down together, to reciprocate insights, resources and learn from each other’s communities. The Dadirri process provides a sound basis for such a storytelling network and for building learning communities that seek to restore harmonious relationships with each other and their land and seascapes.

2. Project Focus and Aims - assisting learning communities:

This joint action research project is intended to assist the emergence of sustainable place communities across the ‘South’ of the planet; initially across the Austral-Asian, Aoetora – Pacific, the Americas, and Africa by supporting learning communities through a storytelling network.

The key focus of the project is to develop learning partnerships³ and more effective friendship agreements between regional and place communities, aid and educational organisations. The project seeks to support local communities to share their learning around developing their strategies and solutions in the sustainable management of tourism enterprises, regional landscapes, water catchments, forests, coral reefs and fisheries etc.

The proposed storytelling - learning network aims to host an on-going, open learning conversation about how to build sustainable places in these times of developing global markets, climate change and the follow-on social and economic turbulence. The storytelling - learning network seeks to honour local cultural knowledge and practices around the sustainable management of the different communities’ land and seascapes; to also involve young people in the re-telling of these stories about traditional custodianship. Another aim is to share learning resources and act to support community and leadership development programs. Assisting learning communities and community development programs is one way to assist local communities enhance their leadership skills in appraising the sustainability of projects, in community planning, project management to determine locally sustainable pathways and futures.

This project concerns supporting informal learning around sustainability and helping communities adapt and co-design support programs to meet the evolving needs of communities across the region. This represents a departure from existing school and credentialist approaches to fostering sustainable development and seeks to promote life

² Schaef (1998) outlines another view of this healing process learning approach amongst North American and Hawaiian social landscapes.

³ This project seeks to apply the notions of organizational learning (Senge, 1990) and communities of practice, see Wenger (2002), Brown (1999), in fostering regional stakeholder learning communities. The focus in this case is to share learning about what works where and why in helping to define and build sustainable regional place communities and landscapes see Ramaswamy, Storer & Van Zey (2005).

long learning⁴. Sustainability is seen here as a place and context dependent notion, concerned with understanding the capabilities of each particular landscape and community and what type of enterprises and practices fits in and helps maintain the essence of places and their communities. A bottom up top down approach is advocated here as a way to support new skill development, mastering new literacies and sharing learning around new social enterprises, food security and environmental conservation projects⁵. The social learning process advocated here differs from the mainstream development approach⁶ of imposing blueprints, programs and plans drawn up by outside ‘experts’ with unfortunately at times, little respect for local community agendas and cultural protocols and ways of doing business.

But how can this learning conversation be initiated? A number of us in Evolveris, feel that an on-line storytelling network is a good start to help to capture and disseminate the experiences and learning of different communities across the region about how they are going about building sustainable places, habitats and livelihoods. It is an opportunity to widely share practical learning gained on the ground in different places and to develop a living library of local people in the stewardship of sustainable communities. Such a network is also a good way to distribute community development resources and programs.

3. Potential Regional Partners

This collaborative project seeks to build a wide ranging regional partnership network via an initiating Australian host group that could involve for example CRAMS (Centre for Research in Aboriginal and Multicultural Studies UNE) regarding their work around the Australia – Timor Friendship Groups, Evolveris, the recently formed Pacific Network of Marine Educators, local communities engaged in sustainable resource management, possibly the Aboriginal Desert Peoples Centre and CARE Australia that is already developing their own internal community of practice⁷. Other potential partners include UNEP and the UNESCO sustainable education program⁸.

4. Regional Community Outcomes

1. A vibrant expanding regional storytelling learning network initially based

⁴ These different approaches to learning for sustainable development are discussed in Scott & Gough(2003).

⁵ The heritage of this bottom-up top down supported, learning approach to sustainable community development is based on the work around participatory rural appraisal of Chambers (1997) and Korten (1980) who emphasizes sharing learning about bottom up community learning with partnering NGO’s.

⁶ See Easterly (2006) who advocates searchers seeking local solutions vs big planning agendas

⁷ See Ramaswamy, Storer and Van Zeyl (2005). CoP’s are communities of practice or informal learning groups or community within an organisation concerned with problem solving and devising improvements.

⁸ and possibly the CREC (Centre for Research on Education in Context UNE) concerning their education for sustainability focus and Australian aid organisations.

across the AustralAsian – Aeotora - Pacific - Americas region that is self-organising and shares learning around building sustainable communities, land and seascapes. It would incorporate storytelling, locally produced publications, movies, ipod conversations and learning community exchange visits.

2. A bank of learning resources and contexted manuals to assist capacity building programs that support local community needs and agendas, help build new literacies around sustainable enterprises, resource management, community well-being and peace across the region.
3. The emergence and linking of learning communities to capture learning about what works, where and why in sustainable community land and seascape management. This can also underpin the development of more effective donor and friendship partnership agreements. This project of fostering learning communities can encompass different forms, supporting communication links with those involved on similar issues and enterprises, facilitating exchange visits and support for opportunities to sit down together to review different initiatives.
4. An on-going series of young emergent community leadership programs located across the learning communities, meeting twice yearly to exchange learning, build links and assist in a community project.

5. Research Contributions:

There are a number of important research avenues in further developing organisational learning theory as it applies to sustainable community development.

5.1 Regional Storytelling – Learning Networks Contribution to Building Sustainable Communities, Regional Well-Being and Peace: The key research focus concerns assessing the role a regional learning network can play in assisting local communities determine sustainable pathways and practices. This research would seek to identify culturally appropriate learning tools and mechanisms across such a regional learning network (many for instance don't have easy access to phone, broadband or the internet and few computers) i.e what works in transferring and adding to social learning across the region. This project also seeks to harvest and share learning as to both how best to enhance community leadership capabilities to enhance local solutions and to further explore collaborative processes to appraise new projects and initiatives fit within the social, economic and environmental capabilities. Linking communities in this way presents a strategy for enhancing peaceful relations across the region in times of social, cultural, economic and environmental turbulence.

5.2 Sustainability as a Social Learning Process – Building Knowledge Ecologies: This research seeks to add to an understanding of sustainability as a social learning process that relies on synergising local place, stakeholder knowledge, indigenous cultural wisdom and 'western scientific expertise'⁹. A storytelling learning network constitutes a

⁹ The idea of social learning for enabling sustainable landscapes has been advocated by Kruger (2001) who depicts landscapes as a key part of local communities, as part of the cultural fabric or relationships involved in place – community. The importance of social learning for sustainable resource management,

social learning process or journey towards sustainable communities and place habitats.

In the past, Elders held traditional knowledge of sustainable land and seascapes, locally and these were passed on through cultural practices and custodian rites and responsibilities. Knowledge about new land practices or technologies spread slowly across regions in Australia or the Pacific (Oceania) for example.

However, in these times, the sustainable management of place communities, land and seascapes involves knowing about and together making sense of how changes in climate will impact traditional livelihoods, the possible consequences of extreme weather events, economic flow-on effects for example of energy price shifts and how these could possibly re-shape our places and communities. The assumption underpinning this research is that effective adaptive responses and evolutionary transitions by communities, may depend on rapidly assembling this wider information about such changes, including how other communities are adapting together with traditional cultural wisdom, local place stakeholder and 'western scientific knowledge'¹⁰ about land and seascape dynamics.

A '*knowledge ecology*' is used here to describe such a compository or evolving stock of linked local knowledge and practices about sustainably managing land and seascapes in times of climate and global socio-economic change. A *regional learning community* refers to the linked network or living library of Elders, the developing relationships between local stakeholders and regional communities that come together to share their knowledge and learning around what new practices they have successfully adopted. An adaptive learning network comes together and focuses on identifying effective adaptive responses and on sharing learning around the same. Regional learning communities may at times meet and function as adaptive learning networks. This research explores how learning communities can build regional 'knowledge ecologies' around sustainable communities (refer fig. 1 below).

Note that 'knowledge ecologies' initially referred to flexible organizational knowledge and document management systems usually utilizing an intranet network (Ginsberg, 2000). This was understood to include shared knowledge management systems that assembled and disseminated new knowledge about innovative practices and effective technologies but only across the stakeholders within a single organisation.

Recent Australian research (Plane, 2003) has posed the usefulness of extending this ecological knowledge model to include industry and its VET providers. Rather than just delivering fixed skill development programs, this model suggested providers such as TAFE reconsider their role in designing and delivering flexible skill development programs that not only meet and adapt but also co-evolve with the needs of their industry stakeholders, assembling learning partnership networks. Plane argues that VET organisations need to re-invent themselves as partners in developing a knowledge

is outlined by Shusler Decker & Pfeffer (2003). Sustainability as a social learning process is also the focus of this writer's PhD research.

¹⁰ McElroy (2002) refers to this re-processing as deep knowledge management i.e. openly inquiring, connecting with other ways of knowing, to deeply question and re-think our past practices and re-invent our organisations and communities in the light of our new circumstances.

ecology that can act as a driver of sustainable regional economic development. Petrides & Guiney (2002) asks the question of whether it is possible for schools to undergo a similar transition from industrial age bureaucracies to developing and delivering more

flexible, partnered innovative educational programs that similarly assemble new local knowledge.

5.3 A New Role for Universities as Partnering Regional Knowledge Ecologies: This research investigates how an Australian tertiary educational provider can re-define itself as a catalyzing partner of regional knowledge ecologies, define what types of educational programs and new roles can enable partnerships for sustainable community development. This work offers insights into a new paradigm that transcends the existing educational model that provides fixed program offerings to individuals to co-designing flexible programs and fluid assessments better suited to meet the needs of emerging communities searching for sustainable practices and new regional enterprises.

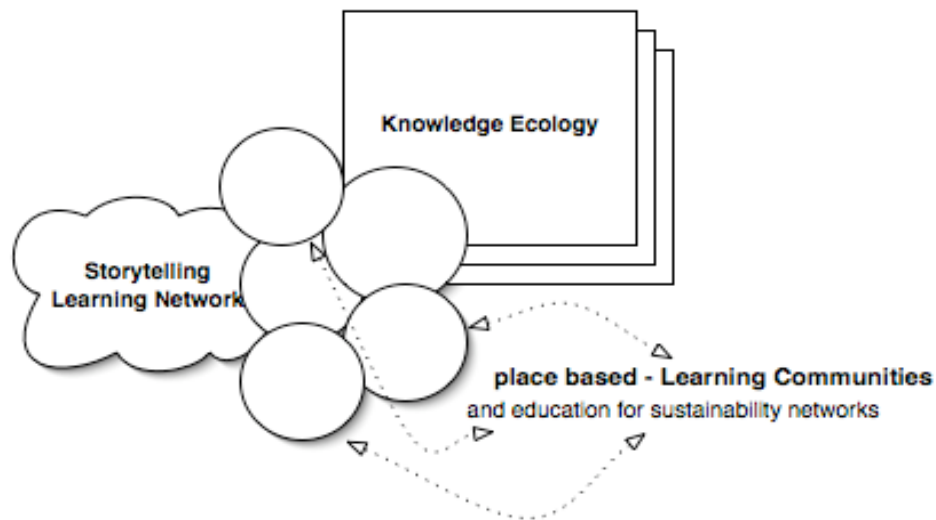


Fig. 1: Storytelling Learning Networks supporting - linking place Learning Communities and building Knowledge Ecologies.

Consideration would also be given to the internal organizational implications for a participating university partner as a facilitator of a knowledge ecology. Recently the CSIRO recognized the need to become a highly integrated but flexible enterprise, more closely aligned with its knowledge stakeholders and so the need to reshape itself along the lines of a matrix organization.

5.4 Emergent versus Mechanistic Models of Change. This work also represents a departure from existing mechanistic models that assume that changing communities and their place landscapes can be easily shaped by planning from the outside. This mechanistic understanding assumes change can be achieved through linear step like processes supplying for example credentialed education programs or more material aid.

Underlying this research is an alternative notion of communities as self-organising emergent systems or human ecologies. Communities are envisaged as diverse entities with a variety of contesting narratives, values and agendas around development of their

place and habitat. Communities' are complex dynamic systems; their interaction with their landscape is seen as culturally shaped; communities co-evolve, both shaping and responding to the changing dynamics across their ecosystems and for example prolonged drought and climate change.

With this understanding, change or 'development' cannot be imposed from the outside without usually unforeseen consequences and non-linear social, cultural, economic and ecological feedback. That is the nature of complex versus simple closed systems.

An alternative emergent model of change instead seeks to foster an environment that facilitates the emergence of new learning, realizations and cultural understanding whereby stakeholders organize their own transformation i.e adopt new practices and develop different relationships or re-organise themselves across their community, neighbours and with their host ecosystems and landscapes. In complexity science jargon this model of change is referred to as 'self-organised criticality'¹¹ and is possible at particular time junctures or 'turning points'. Supporting linked regional learning communities through storytelling networks is one such attempt to create such a favourable environment for self-organising change towards sustainable communities.

6. Some concluding thoughts

The proposed storytelling - learning network would allow us to document and help nurture the evolutionary changes in ideas, thinking, worldviews and cultural perspectives, currently emerging across the globe. It's about helping create a space for a shift to 'a new set of values' including diversity, complexity, harmony, integrity, stability (Rodman (1995), prizing life in both human and non-human communities and recognizing the many aspects and pathways to community well-being and peace building. This facilitated conversation is envisaged as a dialogue about the traditional Indigenous cultural and ecocentric or deep ecology worldviews and the modern anthropocentric views or shallow ecology perspectives and practices Naess (1995). In another sense this conversation it's about ending the war between each other, within ourselves and on nature (Kornfield, 1993).

I'm inviting you to think about a possible collaboration with others having similar values. I feel we need to be bold. From my experience, you can expend huge effort in chasing down grants for \$50k. Recently we found it was easier attracting \$500k. I'm thinking we go for \$2.3m US and look to contacts within UNESCO Sustainable Education programs, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), the United Nations Environmental Program and Indigenous Peoples Forum etc. As Goethe said, 'boldness has magic in it'.

We need a host group here in Australia and to think about others in New Zealand etc who would support such an initiative and developing a mini prototype and examples of the type of stories about communities that could be included.

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¹¹ Seel (2000) provides an outline of these 2 different change models.

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